

**Appropriations Committee
Health Subcommittee
February 24, 2022**

**Public Hearing on:
House Bill 5037 AAC the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30th, 2023
(Department of Developmental Services)**

Good afternoon/evening, Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Abrams, Representative Abercrombie and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Pam Fields and I am the CEO at MidState Arc. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the state budget.

MidState Arc is a non-profit located in Meriden CT. We have been providing supports for people with intellectual disabilities for 70 years. This year being our 70th anniversary. We have made a commitment to people with intellectual disabilities to support them as they live and interact within their perspective communities. In order to assist in this direction, MidState Arc has created the Assistive Technology Training Center to support our staff and providers across the country in helping people with disabilities achieve their independence levels and reach their goals and dreams.

Myself, my board of directors and my staff are very grateful to you for graciously providing the 4% Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) for community nonprofits this year and the increases you provided to increase my direct supports staff (DSP) salaries from \$12 an hour to \$16.50. With this 4% COLA it will raise the starting salary of DSP's to \$17.25. This is the closest they have ever been to a living wage. And as excited as we are for these great increases for our DSP staff, it has caused compression issues for the rest of the employees in the agency who have only received a 3% increase. There is also a pool of money to address the benefits for staff and we have completed the informational request for this endeavor but unfortunately to date we have not seen that money.

As I am sure you are aware, all providers are being drastically impacted by the staffing shortages over the past several years. Our agency currently has over 60 positions open that we are working furiously to fill. We currently fill the positions with overtime and temp staff as we desperately search for professional committed people to join our agency in providing high quality supports for people with intellectual disabilities. We're facing unprecedented challenges recruiting and retaining staff of all skill levels and salaries.

Due to these staffing shortages we have put a hold on providing services for anyone requiring a one – to – one support and/or anyone that has complex needs that could place a further strain on our fragile staffing situation. I know we are not the only agency to do this. I am not sure you are aware but our staff unlike many across the country were not able to work from home and avoid the dangers of direct contact with COVID19. Our staff worked 24/7 throughout this time putting themselves and their families in possible danger in order to keep people with intellectual disabilities safe. Despite our efforts, and there were many additional efforts enacted during this time to increase safety, we lost several of the people we support to this dreaded pandemic. During this time, we also had multiple staff decide the work they were asked to do and the salary they were paid were not worth the possible negative effect for themselves and their families and they chose to leave the field. Our staff are exhausted and overwhelmed and are barely holding on. We are desperate for solutions to this and to funding all the

unfunded mandates placed on our agencies during COVID19 and those that were mandated before COVID19 even surfaced.

Unfortunately, we are now in competition with companies like Amazon and Walmart that require no specialized training, are paying more and offering more hiring incentives. In these positions, they are not forced to work overtime and work in COVID positive environments. Our clinical staff are being lured away by lucrative offers from school districts and telehealth companies. Across the state, The Alliance found that 18%, nearly 1 in 5 nonprofit jobs are vacant right now.

The increase in this year's budget, while very much appreciated, has quickly been absorbed by rising costs all around. In addition, we have only received a 2% increase in our room and board rates to cover expenses like food, heat and the additional property taxes we are faced with. The cost of food increased over 3.5 %, and the cost of heat increased 6%. The cost for upkeep and repairs (if you can even find the products) have increased 15%. The list goes on and on due to the impact of COVID19.

And to add one more issue to this long list we have an additional challenge of managing the high stress levels and over taxing expectations that our staff are experiencing that have a negative impact on how they provide services. as you can see, it is a continual downhill spiral.

I'm here tonight to ask you to continue to support private providers by addressing our chronic underfunding and increase funding this year by an additional \$461 million, or 8% in total for FY23.

This funding is needed now more than ever. Without it, we risk further destabilizing our current service delivery system which has been negatively impacted by COVID-19.

So along with me asking you to provide an additional 461 million dollars to help stabilize the current delivery system, I would also ask you to consider supporting the following proposals by Governor Lamont from the American Rescue Plan Act for DDS:

- \$5 million in FY23 for infrastructure improvements for public and privately-owned camps.
- \$5 million in FY23 to provide additional recreational and leisure opportunities to facilitate socialization and connections as the state emerges from the pandemic.

Graciously and thankfully submitted:

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